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SEATO REEXAMINED

By

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USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT
(Essay)

SEATO Reexamined

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SUMMARY

The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) is a collective defense arrangement formed for the purpose of bringing peace and stability to Southeast Asia. Specifically, SEATO was designed to combat Communist inspired insurgency and aggression in the treaty area. The Manila Treaty, which serves as the SEATO charter, was signed in 1954 by the US, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippine Islands. After ratification by all member nations, it became operative in February 1955.

During its eleven year history SEATO has achieved some notable successes and has experienced some serious failures. The most significant event in the latter category has been the failure to take concerted action against the Communist threat in Vietnam. SEATO's failure to act with unity and determination has raised doubts as to the future worth of the alliance.

The feasible alternatives appear to be: a drastically restructured SEATO, an all-Asian alliance led by either India or Japan, or a unilateral commitment by the US to employ its military power to keep peace in Southeast Asia. Of these alternatives, a revised SEATO is believed to offer the greatest prospect of success.

SEATO REEXAMINED

The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) is entering its twelfth year. Born out of the necessity to halt Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, the alliance is troubled by internal disagreement at a moment when the requirement for solidarity has never been greater. Whether SEATO can weather the storm of Vietnam and emerge as a viable entity remains to be seen. Yet, from an analysis of its purpose, its strengths and weaknesses and the impact of recent and current events in Southeast Asia, one may draw some significant conclusions concerning its future.

THE TREATY

When World War II ended, the people of Asia, as elsewhere, were anticipating a period of peace and tranquility which did not develop. Instead, a pattern of Communist inspired insurgency and aggression enveloped the area. China, Korea, Malaya, the Philippine Islands and Indochina were the principal targets of the Communist campaign to establish control over this vast and densely populated area. To counter this threat, the US began negotiating a series of mutually supporting bilateral and multilateral defense agreements with free Asian states. Thus, on 8 September 1954, the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty was signed at Manila by the US, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan. The treaty (frequently referred to as the Manila

Treaty) was subsequently ratified by each signatory and became fully operative in February 1955. The area specifically covered by SEATO is defined as Southeast Asia, including the entire territories of the Asian parties and the general area of the Southwest Pacific south of 21 degrees 30 minutes north latitude, a boundary which excludes Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The objective of SEATO is to promote peace and security in the treaty area through mutual cooperation in the development of economic resources and through mutual defense against open armed attack or subversion. With respect to the defense features of the treaty, the US made it clear at Manila that she was concerned primarily with Communist aggression and a formal understanding to that effect was made a part of the treaty. No other signatory made this distinction. On the contrary, Pakistan let it be known that she was less exclusively concerned with the possibilities of Communist aggression. Rather, her interest in SEATO stemmed from a fear of aggression by India. Such different points of view on the basic objectives of the alliance have persisted and have contributed to the internal frictions with which SEATO has been plagued.

The alliance is an open ended pact with specific provisions for the accession of other nations who may wish to join. To date, no additional countries have sought membership though there are a number of newly independent states in the treaty area who would likely be admitted upon request. Of the many reasons which might be cited for this apparent lack of enthusiasm, two stand out as

the most significant. First, the neutral nations, led by India, have tended to look upon SEATO as an instrument designed to project the tensions of the Cold War into Southeast Asia. Second, because Britain and France are SEATO members there is the ever present suspicion, among the people of newly independent Asian states that SEATO, in some way, represents a return to colonialism. These reasons have been reinforced by a noticeable reluctance on the part of many Asian nations to officially recognize and admit that communism poses a threat to their independence. Though the attacks on India by Communist China have assisted in dispelling this attitude to some degree, the reality and seriousness of the threat are still not accepted universally. Thus, it has not been possible to generate widespread public support for SEATO within the very area which it is pledged to defend. This lack of a broad base of membership and support from among the Asian states is a serious deficiency of the alliance.

THE PROTOCOL

Closely related to the problem of Asian membership is the relationship of SEATO to Laos, Cambodia and the Republic of Vietnam. These three nations gained their independence from France as a result of the 1954 Geneva Agreements which terminated the French-Viet Minh War. Britain and France officially accepted the Geneva Agreements, whereas the US, for reasons which will not be discussed here, refused to do so. This demonstrated a divergency of views

with respect to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam which came to the fore at the Manila conference some months later. At Manila, the US desired that SEATO membership be extended to the three Southeast Asian nations. However, Britain and France considered such a step to be in violation of the Geneva Agreement and therefore unacceptable to them as parties to that agreement. Yet, Britain and France must have realized that a collective agreement for the defense of Southeast Asia could hardly ignore the Indochina peninsula which points like an arrow from mainland Asia toward the heart of the treaty area. The strategic significance of the peninsula and the continuing nature of the Communist threat there were patently obvious. As a result, a compromise solution was agreed upon. The three nations were not offered membership in SEATO but a protocol was added to the Manila Treaty extending the benefits of the alliance, upon request, to Laos, Cambodia and the free territory of Vietnam. (These countries are frequently referred to within SEATO as the protocol states.) This created a unique situation whereby the protocol states may request and receive the benefits of the treaty without incurring any countervailing obligations. However, since 1955, Cambodia has repeatedly disavowed any desire to be covered by the SEATO defensive umbrella. Laos has been highly inconsistent in this respect, its position on any given date reflecting its latest estimate of the strength and intentions of the Communist supported Pathet Lao. In contrast to both of the foregoing, the Republic of Vietnam has never indicated any

desire to forego its rights afforded by the protocol. In view of these factors, it is not surprising that the relationship of SEATO to the three protocol states has been subject to widely varying interpretation.

NO STANDING FORCE

The member nations of SEATO have never earmarked any of their armed forces specifically for commitment within the treaty area nor has any permanent military command structure been created. This is a major difference between NATO and SEATO and it has from time to time generated considerable discussion. Many SEATO analysts consider this lack of a visible military standing force to be a serious deficiency of the pact. Since the real power of SEATO lies principally in the armed forces of the US, the lack of a standing military force has raised serious doubts in the minds of many concerning the willingness of the US to meet its commitments, when required, in the treaty area. The long-standing and well-publicized US reluctance to get "bogged down" in a land war in Southeast Asia has also contributed to the persistence of this nagging and divisive suspicion. (Undoubtedly, these factors have, in the eyes of Asians, made Communist China's characterization of the US as a "paper tiger" seem more credible.)

In 1954 at Manila the US took the position that because of its worldwide commitments it should not allocate specific forces to SEATO but should maintain large mobile strike forces plus strategically

placed reserves. Since 1954 the US has consistently followed this policy. Other steps have also been taken by the US to allay the fears of its Asian allies and to demonstrate the military potency of SEATO. US air, sea and ground forces have participated throughout the treaty area in numerous exercises under combined commands. US forces have been committed to Thailand on a temporary basis in "show of force" or "stability" operations. The US has actively participated in the development of SEATO military plans for countering various emergencies and finally, it has provided massive aid and committed large military forces to the defense of the Republic of Vietnam (which will be discussed in more detail in subsequent paragraphs). Despite all of these demonstrations of good faith the US has not succeeded in eliminating the lingering doubts as to its resolve to defend its Asian allies. As recently as February 1966, Vice President Humphrey was in Thailand attempting to convince the leaders of that nation that the US was not seeking "peace at any price" in Southeast Asia and that the US resolve to resist Communist aggression in the region was still as strong as ever.¹

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mainland Southeast Asia, though one of the most strategically important areas encompassed by SEATO, is generally an undeveloped

¹Carroll Kilpatrick, "Humphrey Pledges Aid to Thailand," Washington Post, 14 Feb. 1966, p. 1.

area. It is woefully short of facilities such as those which comprise the infrastructure of NATO. As noted above, SEATO has no permanent standing military force. Instead, the security of the area is dependent on military forces which must be brought in from distant locations. The absence of airfields capable of handling long range jet aircraft and satisfying their refueling requirements, the lack of ports capable of rapidly handling large tonnages and the lack of internal routes of communication are major barriers to the rapid introduction, deployment and continuous support of large troop units. Much has been done to overcome some of these deficiencies, especially in Vietnam where the need is immediate and to a lesser degree in Thailand. Still, the problem has not been resolved and it continues to be a serious obstacle in SEATO's defensive planning.

MEMBERSHIP

SEATO's most significant internal problems have stemmed from the heterogeneity of its membership. Major differences in size, power potential, economic development, geographical location, ethnic origin, type of government, domestic policies and international interests exist within SEATO and each has contributed to the friction within the alliance. All member nations still subscribe theoretically to the fundamental objective of the treaty, i.e., to combat aggression and subversion in the treaty area. Beyond this point, little unanimity of opinion can be found. For example, the

US and Pakistan have been at odds since the autumn of 1962 when the US began providing military aid to India. Thailand, in 1962, boycotted SEATO meetings for a month as a result of what it considered US favoritism to Cambodia in a Thai-Cambodia border dispute. Britain and the Philippines took opposite positions on the proposal to create the Federation of Malaysia. Some member nations have extended diplomatic recognition to Communist China, trade with her, and have voted to seat her in the United Nations. The US has taken none of these steps and has publicly discouraged her allies' actions. Finally, in April 1964, France refused to join the other SEATO members in a declaration of support for the war being fought by South Vietnam. As a means of dramatizing her disapproval of US policy in Vietnam, France has ceased to actively participate in SEATO affairs, though she still retains her formal membership in the alliance.

SEATO SUCCESSES

The above are typical of the problems with which SEATO has been afflicted since its inception in 1954. Yet, all has not been on the negative side of the ledger. The alliance must be credited with some notable successes. It has been instrumental in limiting the spread of communism within the treaty area. Though no SEATO military force has ever taken the field in a direct confrontation with the Communist forces, the military power potential of the alliance has proven to be a major obstacle to Communist expansion

in Asia. As long as SEATO exists, the threat of invoking its assistance against Communist aggression strengthens, to some degree, the governments of all the independent states in the treaty area whether they be members or nonmembers. The Communists have recognized this challenge which SEATO presents to their plans for aggression and have persistently attempted to undermine the solidarity and effectiveness of the alliance. This is perhaps the best possible evidence that SEATO has achieved some measure of success.

Specifically, SEATO must be given much of the credit for preventing a complete Communist "take-over" in two of the protocol states--Laos and Cambodia. To be sure, present conditions there are not the optimum which can be envisaged but are far short of the disaster which might have occurred. Laos and Cambodia have been officially "neutralized" with the former tending to unofficially align itself with the non-Communist nations and the latter leaning toward the Communists. Thus, the actions of one tend to offset those of the other with the result that a reasonably effective geographic buffer exists between Thailand and the fighting in Vietnam. Had the Communists successfully gained control of both Laos and Cambodia, the current battlefield in Southeast Asia would probably include not only Vietnam, but Laos, Cambodia and Thailand as well. The military problems associated with dislodging the Communists from so vast an area are obvious. It was, therefore, critical to SEATO that the Communists be denied political and military control of the two countries. Major differences of opinion between the US,

Britain and France prevented SEATO from taking concerted military action when the crisis in Laos was at its worst. However, by conducting timely "show of force" operations in Thailand and by bringing diplomatic pressure to bear, the alliance did successfully prevent Communist control of Laos.

SEATO is essentially a defensive military alliance and has done much to strengthen the military forces of its Asian members. However, it also recognizes the significance of economic progress and social well-being as potent weapons in the fight against communism. In accordance with Article III of the treaty, numerous cooperative measures in the economic, social and cultural fields have been undertaken. These programs are long range and continuing in nature but have produced tangible results. Eventually, they seek to bring about a marked improvement in the standard of living of the people in the Asian member states. When this goal is attained, the opportunity for Communist subversion will have been greatly reduced.

VIETNAM

SEATO has faced crises and challenges of varying importance in the past but none has been as significant as that posed by events in Vietnam. Strategically, Vietnam is vital to the alliance; it is one of the three protocol states to which the Manila Treaty guarantees protection and the aggression there has been officially identified by the US as Communist inspired. In view of these facts and under the terms of the treaty, it would appear that SEATO has a clearly

defined legal right and a moral obligation to openly and officially intervene on behalf of South Vietnam. Yet, it has not done so and the possible reasons for this failure to act should be examined.

Great Britain, France, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines are the SEATO members who have not sent at least token military forces to Vietnam to reinforce US efforts there. The reasons for British and French failure to do so have not been precisely enunciated by the leaders of those nations. However, it is reasonable to assume that their attitudes stem from differences with the US on one or more of three principal points. First, there is the previously discussed divergence of views with respect to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Based on their interpretation of the 1954 Geneva Agreement and the Manila Treaty, Britain and France apparently share the view that SEATO can legally intervene in the protocol states only in the event of overt Chinese aggression. Since there is no overt Chinese aggression in Vietnam, it would follow that SEATO has no legal basis upon which to take action there. The US has taken an opposite point of view. It has interpreted the Manila Treaty as requiring member nations to take positive action to assist the Republic of Vietnam in its fight for survival. Secretary Rusk has repeatedly stated that the US is in Vietnam primarily because of its SEATO commitments.² A second potential point of difference

²John A. Goldsmith, "Rusk Rejects Limit on War Involvement," Washington Post, 19 Feb. 1966, p. 1.

also relates to the 1954 Geneva Agreement. It has been argued that the agreement did not envision a permanently divided Vietnam and that the Saigon government, having refused to hold elections as specified, has no legal basis for its continued existence. The US does not subscribe to this argument, and as a major advocate of the right of self-determination for all people, has long recognized and supported a separate and independent Republic of Vietnam. A third area of disagreement concerns the origin and nature of the conflict itself. Within the US, and internationally as well, there is a vast difference of opinion as to whether the fighting in Vietnam is an indigenous revolution with Communist support or whether it is, in fact, another case of disguised Communist subversion. The US has officially identified it as the latter.

Whether the US, British and French differences with regard to the protocol states stem from these or other points, the facts are that this difference of opinion does exist, that it precluded concerted SEATO military action against the Communist forces in Laos and now has prevented similar action in Vietnam. Clearly, so long as this lack of unity between the three major members persists, there is no chance for corporate military action by SEATO in the protocol states.

As regards nonparticipation in Vietnam by other members, it has always been understood that the smaller nations of SEATO could contribute little to the defense of the treaty area other than their own internal security, support facilities and token military forces.

Australia and New Zealand have sent small military units to Vietnam. Significantly, this leaves the three Asian members of SEATO (Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines) as the small powers who have not contributed forces. Of the three, only the Philippines might be expected to eventually assist with token forces. Pakistan continues to be more concerned with India than with SEATO and her failure to participate actively in Vietnam is simply a means of demonstrating her pique at the US for providing aid to India. Thailand's forces are engaged in preventing Communist subversion within her own borders and this will likely continue to demand first priority for the foreseeable future. Thus, the US, with slight help from Australia and New Zealand, is left to carry the burden for SEATO in Vietnam.

The sum of SEATO efforts in Vietnam (excluding the essentially unilateral US commitment) can hardly be characterized as a concerted attempt to defeat Communist aggression. In fact, SEATO's principal contribution to the conflict has been to provide the US with a diplomatic rationale for taking military action. Thus, regardless of the outcome of current military operations, Vietnam represents a major failure of SEATO. Disunity within the alliance has made it impotent in the face of a major Communist threat, thus destroying its credibility as a deterrent force. This raises grave doubts as to the future value of the pact, its prior successes notwithstanding. Yet, some form of anti-Communist security arrangement will continue to be needed in Southeast Asia as a counterbalance to Red China's power.

ALTERNATIVES

There are three alternative means of achieving this end: a restructured SEATO, a new Asian alliance or total dependence on US bilateral defense pacts.

The revisions to SEATO, which would be required to convert it into a more effective alliance, can be deduced from the foregoing discussion of its weaknesses. In essence, the purpose and character of the alliance must be radically altered. It must assume greater responsibilities and must be made more acceptable to the free nations of Asia. As a first step toward accomplishing the latter, the membership of Britain and France should be terminated. Since 1954 the roles of these two nations in the treaty area have steadily declined. Furthermore, since they were the two principal colonial powers in the area prior to World War II, their motives and actions are always viewed with suspicion by the Asian people. So long as Britain and France retain membership in the alliance, there will be little hope of attracting additional Asian members to SEATO. Additionally, neither Britain nor France has made significant contributions to past SEATO activities. On occasion, they have prevented the alliance from taking strong anti-Communist action and the current obstreperous position of France, as regards US action in Vietnam, has destroyed all hope for future solidarity.

To replace Britain and France and to achieve the objective of a broader base of Asian members, SEATO must actively solicit new

members from among independent Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, India, Burma, Malaysia, and perhaps in time, Indonesia. A thorough reexamination of the status of Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam must also be undertaken to determine the practicality of offering full membership in the alliance to those three states. This effort to recruit new Asian members will be fraught with difficulty but its importance to the alliance requires that it be accorded a high priority.

As a second significant revision, the basic purpose of SEATO should be broadened considerably. Since any conflict within the treaty area provides Asian communism with an opportunity to expand its influence, the alliance can no longer afford to limit its objective to the defeat of Communist inspired subversion and aggression. Instead, it must be concerned with any action which tends to jeopardize the peace and security of the treaty area, whether it be Communist inspired or simply a disagreement between neighbors. Thus, such incidents as the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir and the Indonesia-Malaysia problem would fall within these parameters, requiring SEATO action. To be capable of enforcing its peacekeeping decisions, the alliance must maintain a comparatively small but highly mobile, well-armed and well-trained peacekeeping force capable of being deployed on short notice to any point within the treaty area.

Other fundamental changes to SEATO should include: action by majority vote so that no nation has an effective veto; greater stress

on economic cooperation and development; and a more precise enunciation of the obligations incurred by member nations. Consideration should also be given to a significant expansion of the treaty area.

As an alternative to SEATO, an all-Asian defense pact could conceivably be built around India or Japan. In view of India's population, territory and resources, her acceptance of leadership in such an alliance would be a major step toward counterbalancing Communist power in Asia. The membership of the alliance should exclude the US, Britain and France and as in the previous case, should include the maximum number of non-Communist Asian states. India, herself a newly independent Asian state of considerable stature, would likely be successful in recruiting members for the pact. However, her past obsession with neutralism raises some doubt as to whether she would undertake the task of forming an anti-Communist alliance. If she did, there would remain the further question as to whether the alliance would effectively challenge Communist aggression and subversion, or would instead, for the sake of temporary peace, allow communism to gradually extend its control over all of Asia.

Another major deficiency of such an alliance is obvious. For the immediate future, the indigenous military power of the pact would be incapable of effectively challenging Communist military forces. This could be remedied by the US, and perhaps Britain, officially sanctioning the objectives of the pact and making their

military power available, as required, to guarantee the achievement of those objectives.

An Asian alliance with Japan, rather than India, as its nucleus is likely to possess similar deficiencies. Post-World War II Japan has been strongly antimilitaristic and has shown little inclination to achieve a place of prominence in the field of international diplomacy. Furthermore, Japan's appeal to other Asian nations as the leader of a mutual defense pact is likely to be weaker than India's because of her World War II role as an aggressor. Nevertheless, because of her economic and political stability and her industrial might, Japan seems destined to eventually play a leading part in stabilizing conditions in Asia.

As a third alternative, the US could elect to use its power, unfettered by the restraints of a collective security agreement, as the stabilizing influence in Asia. The basis for this course of action would be a series of bilateral defense treaties between the US and selected Asian nations whereby the US guarantees the defense of the Asian parties against Communist subversion and aggression. Several such treaties are already in being. Based on strategic considerations, others would likely be necessary. As a minimum, these treaties must afford the US an entree to mainland Asia at key points along its periphery and must provide adequate bases to support US operations.

This alternative, to be effective, would probably require a significant increase in US forces permanently maintained in the

Western Pacific, a prospect not likely to appeal to the US Congress or the public. There is also the inevitable question as to why this country should underwrite the security of all of Asia. Additional problems likely to be encountered are: disavowal of the treaties by subsequent governments of the Asian states; a tendency toward complete reliance on the US rather than practicing self-help; and attempts to identify internal unrest as Communist inspired insurgency.

On the positive side, this alternative would afford the US maximum flexibility in determining when to employ its forces and would indicate to Red China that the US has a vital interest in Asia (the continued independence of free nations) which it is determined to defend. The credibility and feasibility of this alternative will be determined largely by the conflict in Vietnam. Unless the US clearly demonstrates its will and its ability to defeat the Communist forces, this course of action will be unacceptable to all concerned.

CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing it is clear that SEATO has enjoyed a certain degree of success during its first eleven years, but failure to take concerted action in Vietnam leaves its future value very much in doubt. To allow the alliance to continue in its present form may well encourage further Communist subversion and aggression in the treaty area. Therefore, SEATO must be strengthened or an alternative means of defending the treaty area must be developed.

From the foregoing consideration of an all-Asian defense pact and an expanded system of US bilateral treaties, one must conclude

that neither offers a utopian solution. The former, with its military impotency and its questionable resolve to halt Communist aggression, would be an unworthy successor to SEATO; whereas the latter, carrying a clear implication of US responsibility for defense of Asia would, in all probability, be rejected by the American people.

Thus, it appears that SEATO, restructured to eliminate its recognized deficiencies, offers the greatest hope for containing Communist power in Southeast Asia.


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